Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe (1930 ? 2013) was an Igbo writer and one of the most important voices in what is now referred to as postcolonial literature. He was born in Ogidi, several kilometres from the Niger River in the south of the territory which would become Nigeria in 1960, upon its independence from the British Empire. His parents were Protestant converts and he spent much of his childhood immersed in their Christian teachings, a background which plays out heavily in depictions of religion in his future writing. An Igbo speaker at home, Achebe started learning English at eight years old.

In 1948, Achebe enrolled at University College (affiliated with the University of London and now known as the University of Ibadan) with a scholarship to read medicine. However, he swiftly changed the subject of his studies to English, losing the scholarship as a result. During this time, Achebe decided to alter his birth name ? Albert Chin?al?m?g? Achebe ? as a symbol of resistance against his namesake, the husband of Queen Victoria; or rather, against the empire over which Victoria was sovereign. While studying English literature and reading colonialist narratives, such as Joseph Conrad?s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Joyce Cary?s *Mister Johnson* (1939), Achebe became increasingly critical of how literature written in the English language had hitherto represented the African continent (including West Africa). He sought to challenge the ways in which literature was complicit in promoting the British Empire through negative stereotypes of colonised and enslaved peoples. Influenced by the small number of Nigerian authors publishing in English, including Amos Tutuola and Wole Soykina who taught at his university, Achebe turned to writing as a means to change how stories about West Africans were being told.

After working for the colonial Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBC) for several years, Achebe completed his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in 1958, basing the title on a line by the Irish poet W. B. Yeats. Achebe?s manuscript was declined by multiple London publishing houses before eventually being accepted by Heinemann. The publishers reprinted it in 1962 as the very first volume in its African Writers Series (which continued until the 1980s). Set in the nineteenth century, the novel is a poignant tragedy based around a complex and deeply-afflicted protagonist, Okonkwo, who, among other personal issues, struggles with the advent of British imperialism in his Igbo village, Umuofia, which arrived through Christian missionary activity. The novel ends by showing readers a glimpse of an English language report about Umuofia by a British District Commissioner, powerfully symbolising the dangerous ways in which West African settings, peoples, and history have long been inadequately and negatively depicted by ethnographers sympathetic to the British Empire.

The novel has had a monumental impact and it continues to influence writers across the globe. It has been translated into over 50 languages and sold nearly 13 million copies. It inspired Achebe to pen two sequels, *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964), forming his ?African Trilogy? which traces Okonkwo?s descendents across Nigeria?s ever-changing modern history. Achebe has been called the ?Father of Modern African Literature?. According to Ben Okri, Achebe ?was a man who answered the questions of his times, the times in which he found himself, in tough, brief, elegant novels and in doing that actually helped to create a language of literature in which many of us came to write in afterwards?.

This connection between literature, history, language, and authenticity is crucial to understanding Achebe?s prose. Indeed, his decision to compose in English was influential, but not without controversy ? especially in terms of his important philological debates with the Kenyan writer, Ng?g? wa Thiong?o, who had rejected English as his literary language. These very debates have been vital to postcolonial discussions on the role played by specific languages choices when writing postcolonial texts. Moreover, Achebe?s prose is rich with the cadences of Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin, and is filled with numerous Igbo words and proverbs, bringing to print a linguistic form which celebrates the speech of people living in Nigeria.

Achebe?s final two novels, *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), primarily explore corruption in the highest political levels of Nigerian society in the years after its independence. He wrote powerfully against the warfare and imposed famine against Biafra (between 1967 and 1970) during which time many of his peers were imprisoned, including Soyinka, and two million civilians died, many from starvation.

In one of his many published essays, Achebe states that ?the writer is often faced with two choices ? turn away from the reality of life?s intimidating complexity or conquer its mystery by battling with it. The writer who chooses the former soon runs out of energy and produces elegantly tired fiction?. Achebe absolutely never ?turn[ed] away? from unpacking and depicting the violent impact of imperialism on Nigeria. He explored the nation?s complicated relationship with religion, language, and literature with great nuance and with compelling attention to the consequence of these issues on the individual. It is for this reason that he is one of the most significant authors of the twentieth century.
